**Thoughts of Endless Night**

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# Thoughts of Endless Night

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Summary

Will lives a normal, if tedious, life in London with his sister, Abigail. That is, until his job takes him to the mysterious Lecter Castle and into Count Hannibal Lecter's orbit.

He knows there's something wrong with the man, but after a taste of what life without the restraints of polite society could be like, he finds it harder and harder to remember why should he care.

Dracula AU

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

# Part 1

*May 3rd*

*Dear Abigail,*

*I finally arrived at the hotel Count Lecter recommended to me. It was easy enough. Varėna is a very beautiful place, and near enough to the capital of Lithuania that I didn't have trouble getting here. Making it to the hotel (which is charming in an antique sort of way) was a bit trickier, but I managed.*

*I must confess I almost feel guilty here without you, even if it was not by choice. You've always said you wanted to travel and see the world, and I have yet to even take you out of England. As big a shame as it is that Mr. Brown wasn't well enough to make the trip out to come finish the real estate deal with Count Lecter, I admit I do not resent the opportunity to travel. Maybe I can bring you here one day. Only if you're being a good girl and not causing any problems for Alana, who so generously convinced her parents to let you stay with them, of course. And that does include causing her undue stress by showing off your collection of morbid newspaper clippings. If a good one is printed while I'm away, I'll have to ask you to be discreet about keeping it; you can show it off to me when I come back.*

*I'm sure you and your hunger for adventure would be very happy here, as I have yet to find a single map that can point me in the direction of Lecter Castle. Fortunately, the Count left a letter for me with the owner of the Hotel, promising me he would arrange for my transport to the estate. I do assume, however, that it will be in a more remote location, so I can't be sure how often it will be possible for me to send you a letter. Worry not; I was informed that the Count is also a doctor, so in the case of an emergency, I won't have to come back here to get help.*

*Tomorrow morning I will leave for the castle; I cannot say I'm not curious about the almost mystic picture that has been painted about Count Lecter.*

*Until my next letter, with love,*

*Your brother, Will.*

*P.S. I sealed this letter yesterday, but this morning I felt compelled to add that I'm slightly concerned about the population of wolves around here. The hotel owner and his wife seemed not to know what I was talking about, but I could swear I could hear them howling all night and very close, at that. It felt almost as if they were under my window. I've barely slept, as you can imagine.*

Will gave the re-sealed letter to the owner of the Hotel, who kindly promised to send it. With that out of the way he took a seat in the living room to wait for the carriage that Count Lecter had arranged for him. He was grateful, in honesty, for how good of a host the Count was

proving to be, even before their first meeting. Will hoped he wouldn't prove poor company, in exchange.

It was going to be difficult, though. He tended to act and think and feel in ways that were known to put people off. Ever since he was a child, he had been held at an arm's length by everyone, afraid that somehow the oddness of his behavior was contagious. He was thankful every day that Abigail (who tended to be as strange as him in some aspects and weirder still in ways to which he could not relate) had thus far proven to be better at blending in with all the rest, at least when she took the time to try. Even with her efforts, Will had noticed that Abigail's masking didn't take place as frequently as Alana, who was a dear family friend, had hoped it would. The woman, halfway in age between Abigail and Will, felt a certain responsibility to see to it that Abigail was properly raised following the passing of her parents, which had left William as her sole guardian.

He would put in special effort for Count Lecter, not only because the man had been nothing if not generous and kind, but also because this was Will's opportunity to ascend in his station. He had been sent with a very important task, and if it went well he might be able to secure not only a promotion, but also a raise. He didn't *need* more money, per se, but with Abigail soon to turn eighteen, Will wanted her to have everything that a girl that age might need, though he was inclined to believe she might just tell him they should use the money on travel, so that she might experience something other than London society, if only for a few weeks. Perhaps now that he was beginning to understand the appeal of new places he would consider it more heavily.

Seated in the living room, he removed from one of his bags a gift that Abigail had given him before his departure—a small journal so he could document all of his "adventures" and retell them to her with the best possible accuracy. As silly as it had sounded, Will decided to humor her, even if before yesterday he didn't have much to say in his entries. Now, however, he could at least write about his fruitless attempts at finding a map that showed the property that would be his final destination.

Twenty minutes later the inn keeper called him to tell him the carriage had arrived and Will took his bag, tucked the journal back inside, and prepared for the journey still ahead of him.

Many hours later, the night fully dark with only the moon illuminating their way, the carriage came to a full stop. Will stepped down to ask where they were, not a castle in sight.

"This is where I stop. I was told someone else would meet us here to take you the rest of the way."

As he said it, Will heard another carriage coming closer. In appearance it was very similar to the one he would be leaving behind, but this coachman wore a cloak that made it impossible for Will to actually see his face, especially in the dead of the night. As it slowed to a stop he left the first carriage with a goodbye to the driver and stepped up into the other one, barely noting that the coachman had responded with indifference to his words of hello. Perhaps he

didn't speak English. Will quickly fell asleep to the rocking of the carriage as it pulled off into the night.

The following was the first of many events that Will would write with skepticism in his journal, playing it off as a very real dream or the product of many sleepless nights, but at that moment what Will believed had occurred was as follows:

He woke up to find the carriage had stopped. Looking through his window he could see they were still in the middle of the forest, no castle in sight. He took another moment—that moment it takes to fully wake up and correctly process what is happening in front of your eyes—to realize then that they weren't alone. A pack of what Will observed to be particularly large wolves formed a semi-circle around the carriage. Before he could come to a decision about what the best course of action might be, in a situation such as the one he found himself in now, the coachman stepped down from the carriage, and in low tones of voice, began to speak to them in Lithuanian. After a moment—the words exchanged between them lost on Will, who was unfamiliar with the language—the wolves turned and slowly stalked back behind the treeline.

The coachman stepped back up onto the carriage, and slowly their journey resumed.

It was too dark to even consider writing, but Will had resolved to write about it come daylight. How could he describe what he had witnessed without sounding utterly mad to the reader? Will had been called a madman and worse, in his lifetime, but he had never been as close to believing it as he was after watching the hooded driver speak commands that were then followed to animals who were nothing short of completely and utterly wild. On the verge of a fever that had come with these thoughts, Will closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

He was awakened as the carriage came to a stop. It was a shame that he had fallen asleep; he found the castle imposing, an impressive sight that he could only imagine might have been satisfying to watch grow larger the closer they came.

They.

Will was reminded of the coachman and stepped down from the carriage to look for him in order to thank him for the drive, but found him nowhere to be seen. Upon looking across the garden, though, he noted a figure standing tall and unmoving in the door of the castle. The man was likely a bit taller than Will, but the air of omnipotence emanating from him presented him as even taller. He looked to be around fifty, his hair whiter than not. Will didn't consider himself to be the best dressed of men, but the stranger's perfectly kept appearance and undoubtedly expensive state of dress was something Will felt unnecessary, assuming that as the days went on he would no doubt, at some point, catch the man in greater disarray. This he felt because in that moment, Will was certain of the identity of the man before him. Suddenly Will felt as if he had known Count Lecter for a very long time—if not in this lifetime, perhaps in some lifetime before. Seeing him now was a bit like seeing someone who

you had once held very dear but had since begun to fade from your memory. Seeing them now, though, you would wonder how it could be that you ever forgot them.

“Welcome to my home, Mr. Graham; please come in. My home is your home,” the Count greeted him, looking as if he wished to step closer though he remained fixed in his place at the threshold of the door.

“Count Lecter, I presume?” he asked for the sake of courtesy. He hadn’t realized that his feet were carrying him into the foyer until he found himself passing the threshold. Once inside, whatever had kept Count Lecter in his place disappeared and the man hurried to greet Will with a firm handshake.

Will was stiff, both with the general discomfort he experienced when meeting strangers, and Count Lecter’s hand was ice cold as if it wasn’t May and a fire wasn’t likely burning inside.

“Please, call me Hannibal. I hope we will be friends, at least during your stay. Now, let me collect your luggage and I’ll show you to your room.”

Will, who only now realized he had walked in without his luggage, tried to argue he could do it himself, but Count Lecter –Hannibal—would hear none of it.

“I insist, Mr. Graham. You are my guest and I shall look out for your comfort myself.”

Will surrendered. In an attempt to feel less of a burden, he decided to at least return the courtesy of the familiarity.

“Then please, if I’m to call you Hannibal, I ask that you call me Will.” It wasn’t an offer he commonly made—he preferred people not assume a familiarity with him that he seldom reciprocated.

“Thank you, Will. Now, if you allow me, I’ll take you to your room so you can refresh yourself after your voyage. After that, please come to the sitting room; I’ll have dinner ready for you,” Hannibal instructed as he guided Will through all the corridors in the castle.

“It sounds an awful lot as if you prepared the food yourself,” Will replied and immediately winced, noting that it had sounded ruder than it had been in his head. Hannibal took it in stride.

“Completely on purpose, I assure you. I love to cook; I make all my meals myself, and I’ll be making yours for the next few days.”

Will was glad Hannibal was walking in front of him, and therefore couldn’t see the astonishment on his face. Will cooked, of course, as his parents had passed away when Abigail was barely six years, and without enough money to hire someone to help, Will made all of their meals in the years before Abigail could fend for herself.

Money wasn’t a problem for Hannibal, that much was obvious. Not only did the man live in a castle, but it was handsomely decorated, as well, with fine items well worth a fortune, if Will were to take a guess based solely on their appearances. The fact, then, that the man cooked

not only for himself but for his guests when he had them seemed astonishing, to say the least.

It occurred to Will at that moment that he hadn't seen a single servant, and he had forgotten to inquire about the coachman. They turned the corner to his room before he could make mention of it. The quarters were cozy, with a fire log and a generously-sized bed that looked hellishly comfortable.

"I'll go heat the food; please take as much time as you need. Your bathroom is through that door," he indicated, eyes settled on a door at the far side of the room.

Will prepared to speak but the Count piped up before he could manage to get the words out.

"Forgive my impertinence, but should I assume you are not a fan of eye contact as a general rule, or is it me in particular that makes you uneasy?"

Will flinched. It was not an accusation, but it felt like one. There was no good answer to that question; he could tell the truth, which often came across as off, or present himself as ungrateful.

Insane was better than rude, Will guessed. Hannibal came across as a man with little tolerance for rudeness.

"Eyes are distracting; you see too much, or you don't see enough. I find it hard to focus when overwhelmed at the amount of information eyes give, so I avoid them when possible. Nothing personal, I assure you," he explained, glancing at Hannibal's face. The man didn't appear to be put-off, much less freaked out. He looked intrigued—maybe even delighted. Will wasn't sure that was any better.

Feeling he had pushed enough for the moment, Hannibal took his leave after Will thanked him, leaving the man alone with his thoughts. He would refresh himself and go have a quick dinner. Things would feel less surreal tomorrow, he was sure.

"His eyes looked red," he whispered to himself. He hadn't planned to say it, and in fact it had taken him a moment to process that his eyes had indeed been tinted red in the first place, as he hadn't consciously noticed in the moment.

Red eyes. Ice cold skin.

Fine, he would write it down in his journal; it was the kind of stuff Abigail would want to know. If the next time he interacted with Count Lecter his eyes had returned to the brown Will logically knew they must be, he would just add a note chalking it up to his exhaustion.

"I hope you don't mind eating alone, I'm afraid I took my meal prior to your arrival," the Count apologized when Will had finally made it down for dinner, but he could barely

concentrate on the words as they were spoken to him, the food like nothing he'd ever smelled before.

Even without taking a bite, Will knew this was likely to be the best dish he'd ever been served, and it wasn't even *close* to being in the same category of anything he might be able to manage in the kitchen.

"Please, don't apologize. I feel I should thank you yet again for making the food in the first place," said Will after he regained his focus.

As much as Will didn't mind eating alone, there was something to be said about how unconventional the situation was. Usually Will would wait for his host to eat first, but with Hannibal serving himself nothing except for a glass of wine, Will had no choice but to take the first bite himself.

The food was delicious, as he had expected, but even the almost other-worldly experience couldn't divert his attention from the intense gaze as Hannibal's eyes followed the food from the fork to Will's lips –and even if Will didn't have the best gauge for social situations, he was sure the eyes had stayed there for longer than possibly appropriate– and finally to Will's throat as he swallowed.

Will Graham wasn't used to receiving prolonged amounts of non-hostile attention, and so he told himself that was why when his face suddenly flushed at the gaze roving over him. Hannibal's smile grew at Will's redness, and the man forced himself to think of a way to divert the attention.

"I almost forgot, here's the letter from my boss," Will announced, removing said letter from the pocket of his jacket to offer to the other man.

Hannibal accepted it without missing a beat and Will took advantage of the man's attention being elsewhere to continue eating his food, perhaps not enjoying it as much as he could have in his rush.

"Yes, everything seems to be in order. Your boss apologizes for the sudden change of assistant;  it says that your co-worker, Mr. Brown, is still sick and your employer assures me he has every reason to believe you will serve me well in your time here," he summarized, folding the letter back neatly.

Yes, business, that was a safe topic. Will knew how to talk about business.

The rest of the evening was spent discussing Hannibal's hopes of acquiring a few properties around London, and even though he was surrounded by opulence, the way the man talked about buying multiple properties made Will a bit nervous. After all, even if he had never gone hungry, he remembered how the first few years after his parents passed Abigail's clothes included quite a few hand-me-downs from Alana, whose mother had kept most of her dresses. He managed to push that discomfort aside, and by the time Hannibal bid him good night and notified him he wouldn't be back until late afternoon the next day, Will had grown wearily comfortable around him.

It was strange; the overwhelming lack of being overwhelmed that he experienced in this moment. And not in the way Alana wouldn't overwhelm him because she had impressive control of her emotions around him most of the time, and therefore her presence was just a warm and friendly feeling, or in the way Abigail wouldn't overwhelm him, because even with her intense emotions so proper of the youth, her emotions felt so familiar that they weren't any more exhausting than his own.

But Hannibal was different. Will just didn't feel much from him at all. Occasional amusement, and when Will was eating there was most definitely something else, but he couldn't seem to put it into words. The rest of the time, though, there was nothing.

It made the Count quite interesting, in Will's books….not that he would tell the man that.

"Here we part for the night. Rest well and I'll leave some food for you to eat when you've slept off the tiredness of the travel," Hannibal informed him as he bade him goodnight.

"I will, and thank you again for your hospitality–" Will lost his train of thought, however, when the wolves began to howl. They sounded close—maybe waiting just outside the castle—but the prospect seemed ridiculous.

"I hope you aren't scared of wolves, as I'm afraid their presence in this forest is quite strong," Hannibal spoke upon noting he had lost Will's attention.

"Oh, no, not afraid. I was just thinking. In the hotel I could hear them, as well. They seemed close—as if one of them was standing under my window. The owner said wolves never venture into town."

Will didn't add anything about how he must have imagined it because he was almost certain that he hadn't. He would let the count assume what he wanted.

"Maybe they made an exception for your arrival. They smelled new blood."

Will laughed at the joke—or what he was pretty sure was a joke. Hannibal's posture was relaxed and he wore a half-smile, seeming to expect no answer other than laughter in response.

The next day, upon waking, Will found the castle empty. Hannibal would be out until late evening, but Will had expected there might be at least one or two servants around. As much of a perfectionist as the Count clearly was, it was difficult to believe he was solely responsible for the maintenance of the estate. Then again Will had only been in one small portion of the castle and it was impossible to tell in what condition he might find the rest.

Back in the dining room his breakfast had been served and his coffee kept warm by the pot sitting on the hearth. Even cold the food was delicious and Will began to wonder if there was anything the Count *didn't* excel at.

When he had finished his meal he decided to go to the library they'd spoken of the previous day. He got there easily enough, and he had to admit it was one of the most impressive private collections he had ever seen. The bookshelves were floor to ceiling, each completely

full. Will, only knowing English and a modest amount of French, was at a loss for what most of the works could even be about. After a thorough search, though, he found a considerable selection of books in English: some novels, a bit of poetry, and a lot of non-fiction. Among the works were also volumes on history, geography, architecture, and everything one could hope to learn about England.

One book caught his attention, though, and Will pulled from a shelf what appeared to be a rather old edition of *Dante's Inferno*.

"Soon you will be where your own eyes will see the source and cause and give you their own answer to the mystery," quoted Hannibal behind him. Will jumped in his place, not having heard the other man enter the library, much less approach him. "I must admit that it's not what I would have expected to catch your eye."

"You don't think me well-read, Count?" teased Will to even his own surprise, as he seldom felt comfortable enough for more than bitter remarks. To avoid addressing Hannibal's delight at Will's playfulness he changed the topic back to the book. "I just can't imagine you reading it in English; I would think nothing short of the original Italian would do."

If he had thought Hannibal was delighted before, he now looked like a child who had been given all the sweets he could manage. Some of the same intensity that had been in his eyes the previous night came back. Will didn't think to question if Hannibal even spoke Italian at all.

"You would be right, of course. I first read the book in my youth, during the time I lived in Florence, and I was so charmed with it that I've bought a copy in every language I've been able to get my hands on." Hannibal told it as letting Will in on a secret delight. How the man managed to weave such... intimacy into the most superficial conversations was beyond Will. "I'm glad you found the English section. These books have been my guides the last few years, preparing me for my imminent move to London. They've helped me to both familiarize myself with the culture and the language."

"You'll have to excuse me, but I find it hard to believe the language poses an obstacle to you. I swear you speak better than I, and certainly better than many of my compatriots," said Will with complete earnesty. It would be very easy to forget English wasn't the Count's first language, if not for the strong accent.

Will hoped the accent would remain as strong even after Hannibal had lived for years in London. It was magnetic—inviting. He found himself fond of it.

"It was not my first time approaching the language, I admit, but the words still feel foreign in my mouth. I will thank you if you correct any mistake you hear me do."

"Make," said Will, on autopilot. "You make a mistake; you don't do it."

"I'll have to spend as much time as possible talking with you so as to keep from making those mistakes in London. I wouldn't want to stand out."

Will bit his tongue because if he didn't, he would say something stupid about how Hannibal would stand out in a room of a hundred men from a hundred different countries. There was something about him that caused Will to suspect it was a Herculean task to be in the same room as the count and not feel gravitated towards him.

Will wouldn't notice until later that evening when writing in his journal that it had sounded a bit like Hannibal had been making up excuses to talk with him. He wondered if he had heard the count say the expression "make a mistake" correctly before, but he couldn't be sure.

In the library, Hannibal had started to walk to one of the tables in the middle of the room, Will following soon after.

"I would say this is as good a moment as any for you to show me the house you have procured for me, wouldn't you agree?"

Will nodded, slightly flustered at having to go back to his bedroom for the paperwork. In the mystic aura of the Count and the Castle, he had almost forgotten the job he had come to do.

He had very little to add to Hannibal's already extensive knowledge of the property and its surroundings, and so focused Will primarily on the legal details.

They stayed there until the count announced it was time for dinner.

"I'm afraid I ate too much when I went out, and so once again I won't be joining you for dinner," Hannibal excused himself. Will accepted the explanation without question, already much less reluctant than the night before, after finding how good the man's food was.

The conversation flowed easier than the previous day, and so once Will was finished eating they stayed up talking about anything that caught Hannibal's interest, which Will began noticing, with the more time that passed, usually related to him and his life.

"You'll have to forgive me if I'm crossing a line, but I notice you don't talk with much fondness of your life in London. Is there nothing you truly cherish there?" Hannibal inquired.

"Just my sister," he answered honestly.

"You have a sister?"

Hannibal looked surprised, and Will found himself surprised that he hadn't mentioned Abigail before. He was so used to everyone knowing about her.

"Yes, my little sister Abigail," he gave a half-smile, almost able to hear her correct him. "Not so little now, I guess. She's turning eighteen in a few months. Hard to think of her as anything other than a child, though. I've been taking care of her since she was five."

"You? Not your parents?"

"Died in an accident," he added as an explanation. Will met Hannibal's eyes for a second and saw something he wasn't expecting to find there: kinship. He wondered if Hannibal would

tell him about whatever it was he was thinking about, but for the moment he diverted the conversation. “She doesn’t care much for our life there, either. She’s always wanted for us to travel, find a life more interesting than hers. I wasn’t sure about life abroad being any more interesting, but after this trip I’m more inclined to agree.”

“My sister used to be the same,” Hannibal revealed to him. “She wanted adventure, freedom. I never got to take her further than where we would ride our horses in the afternoons.”

Will didn’t have to ask to know that his sister wasn’t alive anymore. The idea of Abigail suddenly not being tore at Will’s heart, threatening to rip it out.

“What was her name?” Will asked, but before even hearing the answer he knew it. He couldn’t explain the feeling—he probably would not even write it down later. He bit his tongue again, this time to avoid saying it at the same time.

“Mischa.”

Will’s dreams were noisy and aggressive, but just vague enough that he couldn’t describe them when he woke up.

The problem was *where* he woke up.

Instead of waking in the bed of the guest room he found himself in the middle of the stairs, going up to a part of the castle he hadn’t yet been in. He blinked a couple of times, pinched his own arm to make sure he was awake, but nothing changed.

He looked out of a window that he had passed a couple steps back and realized he was much higher in the house than his room was, and so he began to descend. When he reached the next hallway he found Hannibal walking toward him, slight confusion in his face.

“Will, what are you doing here? It’s still quite early, and you look like you need more sleep.” It wasn’t quite an accusation, but Will could see the count wasn’t as happy to see him as he usually was, understandable because the sun had yet to come up and he had found Will wandering around the castle in his pajamas.

“I... don’t know. I think I was sleepwalking; I just woke up here.” It was a strange explanation, if one at all, but he couldn’t think of anything else that could have happened.

Hannibal relaxed. Nothing in his posture changed, but Will could feel the atmosphere relaxing around him.

“Let me escort you back to your room. In the meantime I ask you to indulge my curiosity. Do you have any record of sleepwalking? It’s quite rare for it to start in adulthood.” Somehow the detachment he had when asking the question, the same one most doctors had, made it easier for Will to answer as he followed his host back.

“Uh, no, this is the first time.” And then, to take a bit out of the seriousness of the moment, he asked with a sarcastic tone, “should I be worried, Doctor?”

“I don’t think so. It may be the stress, but please do tell me if you start having any other symptoms that might point to a medical irregularity.” Hannibal’s answer suggested that he either didn’t notice the sarcasm or had decided to ignore it.

Hannibal bade Will goodnight as they reached his room, Will mumbling an agreement before closing the door behind him and falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. It was so sudden, the bone-deep tiredness that dragged him to unconsciousness, that he didn’t even wonder what the count was doing awake at that hour and perfectly dressed.

Next time he woke up in his bed, thankfully, though it seemed to be evening again already. His sleeping habits had been all over the place since his arrival.

After washing and dressing to go to the dining room, thinking it quite surprising how he had fallen into a routine in mere days, he found his meal served and as delicious as always.

Unfortunately, the headaches he had been experiencing on and off the last few weeks had come back in full force, and so even when he decided to go to the library he ended up sitting without reading, glad for how little natural light got in.

He hadn’t felt the passage of time, but eventually Hannibal found him, and if true to routine, that meant it was late evening already.

“Hello, Will. Would it be improper for me to say that you look unwell?” asked Hannibal with the confidence of someone who knew he wasn’t being improper at all.

“Slept terribly, before *and* after you found me,” he explained. “I get a lot of nightmares, and recently I’ve been pained with headaches.”

“Well, as a doctor I can’t in good conscience let you work like this. Let me prepare you some light dinner and send you back to sleep. That is, after all, the best remedy.”

“No, please, Hannibal; I can work. I came here to help you with your acquisition of property, not to be a patient,” insisted Will, annoyed at being coddled. He was capable of managing a bad night’s sleep and a headache, thank you very much.

“Out of the question. If not as a doctor, then hear me as a friend. It can only do you good to get a full night of sleep. Any paperwork we need to do can wait until tomorrow, can’t it?”

“It can...” agreed Will with reluctance, not finding a way to resist without coming off as ungrateful. Besides, it was hard to deny that he really could use some more sleep.

Time still felt a bit slippery, and so the time between standing up, sitting down in the dining room, and Hannibal’s preparation of dinner was blurry at best.

“You made me chicken soup?” he asked when he finally felt real again, like time had gone back to its usual passing.

Hannibal sighed, and Will knew he had missed the likely very detailed and exotic description of the dish he had been given.

“Yes,” Hannibal accepted with resignation.

Will smiled, a warm feeling back in his chest, and he knew it wasn’t just because of the soup.

“I haven’t eaten chicken soup since the last time Abigail had a cold, and that must have been at least two years ago,” Will reminisced. “I know I’m not giving the best impression, but both of us are usually very healthy. Even as children, which I’m very grateful for. I don’t think I would have known how to deal with more than a cold when she was a child.”

“You would have managed, I’m sure, as all parents do.” A moment of silence, Hannibal deciding if he should say more or not. “Mischa was a healthy child, too. She loved to go out and play in the mud, much to our mother’s chagrin.”

“Tell me more about her,” asked Will.

Hannibal looked surprised for a moment, and Will wondered when the last time had been that he had been asked about her. When was the last time he had felt he could talk about her?

“She was a beautiful child, and a very happy one, too.”

“I can imagine.” Will saw the puzzle forming in front of him, creating a scenery he had never seen. “One of those kids that feels bad when you kill an insect, that gives a genuine smile to everyone. She probably adopted a cat without permission because she couldn’t watch it suffer, and no one could tell her no. Didn’t understand conflict, and asked why everyone couldn’t just be nicer to each other.” The picture became clearer. “Blonde, light brown eyes. Everyone thought she would become a beauty when she was older, but she never grew beyond her childhood.”

Even in the confusing state of mind he found himself in, he realized he had surely gone too far with that last part, though he found Hannibal wasn’t angry. The most obvious emotion in his face was curiosity, but there was something else that Will couldn’t place.

He looked up, meeting Hannibal’s eyes. Every part of his brain that had been trying to categorize what he was seeing shut down.

He could hear a distant melody.

“You describe my sister as if you had met her.” Not a question, just a statement. He wasn’t asking Will to explain, and maybe that’s exactly why he said it the way he did.

“It’s your voice, perhaps. It’s so familiar. Like a voice in a dream I cannot place.”

Will wasn’t sure if what happened next happened in a dream or waking moments, and he would later write in his journal that it hadn’t felt real at all.

Hannibal stood from where he sat and walked towards him. He cupped Will’s face between his hands and whispered and the softest of voices.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Then everything went black.

This time, Will was sure he was asleep. A big stag covered in black feathers stood in front of his bed. Because it was a dream, and the logic of such a creature barely registered in Will’s brain, his first thought was that he must have forgotten to close the door.

The stag walked out of the room, and Will felt compelled to follow it.

Once outside his room, he noted that they weren’t in the castle at all, anymore. It was just a big labyrinth, with walls of old stone covered in moss that went all the way to the ceiling. A few torches every so many steps were the only things that illuminated their surroundings.

Will couldn’t look back, only forward. He knew the fire of the torches died as soon as he walked past them, leaving only darkness behind him.

When Will opened his eyes, he was no longer in the labyrinth, and the strange creature that had been his guide was nowhere to be found. Looking around him, he found he was surrounded by trees, the only light surrounding him the moonlight that passed between the branches.

He tried to orientate himself to no avail. He hoped he wasn’t too far away from the castle.

When something wet and cold touched his hand his heart skipped a bit and looked down as a reflex, questioning if he had actually woken up at all. A wolf, and a big one, was scenting his hand.

Now that he was aware of it, he realized that the one at his hand wasn't the only wolf, and there were in fact many that surrounded him, though none of them came closer. Only the one that had just retreated from his hand stood within arm's reach, but came no further.

He didn't know what to do. If the wolves were planning to attack him, they would have already done so, though that didn't mean that they wouldn't react if he made a move too sudden for their taste.

" *Nesiartink* ," commanded a voice from behind him. It was one he knew well.

The wolves retreated, and soon Will couldn't see them anymore.

"Hannibal, was that real?" he asked, not knowing what else to say. Early May, as it was, the night wasn't too cold, but Will wished it was. The cold would feel real.

"Will, I saw the door open and I got worried. Did you sleepwalk again?" Hannibal didn't look particularly worried, in Will's opinion. And he had ignored the question.

"How did you get the wolves to go away?" There was another question there that Will knew he should ask. It all felt a bit too familiar, even whatever it was that the man had said. As much as he grasped for an answer, though, he came up empty-handed.

Why couldn't he think clearly? His brain had never betrayed him in this way.

Hannibal stepped closer and put the back of his hand on Will's forehead. He was cool. Cold, even.

"Will, you have a fever. We should go back, okay?"

It was not okay. Why was Hannibal avoiding his questions? He prepared to keep fighting, but as soon as he made eye contact with him, all fight left his body. Suddenly he was just tired, instead.

"Okay."

He let himself be guided towards the castle. They weren't too far away, but Will would have certainly gotten even more lost if he had tried to go back on his own. Hannibal seemed to know the forest (logical, considering he lived there), and so they were soon back in the safety of the castle.

"Why don't you go wash yourself, Will? You are covered in dirt," the Count suggested.

Will didn't even look down at his clothes, he was sure Hannibal was telling the truth. He went to his bathroom and cleaned himself quickly.

He had noticed since the first day that there were no mirrors in the bathroom. Luckily he had brought one in his bag from back home. He took the mirror, expecting the look of a man who might be more at home in the middle of a forest than in a castle, but was surprised to find he was... mostly clean-shaven.

Not completely shaven, but his beard couldn't have been more than two days of growth. *How could that be, though?* He hadn't shaved since he had gotten here.

"Will." Hannibal's voice came from behind him. Will jumped in shock, letting go of the mirror to see it shatter on the floor a mere second later.

"I didn't hear you coming," he tried, though it felt incorrect. He couldn't bring himself to say anything else.

"I apologize, but I brought you some tea. It's Lavender; it's supposed to help you sleep." Hannibal offered him the cup, but Will knelt down to pick up the pieces of broken mirror instead.

In his haste he cut his finger with a sharp edge, but he ignored it to keep picking up what he could. When he stood upright again, Hannibal hadn't moved. At all. In fact, Will would say he was too still. He couldn't even see him breathing.

"Hannibal?"

That seemed to shake the man from his stillness and he shook his head and extended the teacup to Will again. Will left the shatters in the trash and took the cup, still a bit thrown off by Hannibal's behavior.

"You're bleeding, Will. You need to be more careful."

"What?" He blinked in confusion, then turned to his hand. He had believed the cut had been minimal, but there was actually a lot of blood in his hand. "Damn it, I didn't realize it was that deep."

Hannibal took the injured hand and brought it near his face. It was very evident he was breathing, now. He was even breathing a bit hard. For a moment Will had the ridiculous notion that Hannibal would do something weird like... licking at his hand.

Of course, that was more the product of Will's disturbed brain than the reality of the situation. After a few more deep breaths, Hannibal took a towel and started cleaning Will's hand.

"Try to sleep," said Hannibal, and left.

Will was still standing in the bathroom, Lavender tea in hand and only the pain in his palm to promise him that he was awake.

He walked back to his bedroom, lit the candle on his desk, and took out his journal, all while taking small sips of the tea. Of course, even Hannibal's *tea* was better than anything Will had ever had.

He opened the journal to a new page, everything falling into place. He knew why he'd been so startled at Hannibal's arrival. It wasn't that he hadn't heard the man; he had already gotten used to how silent he was for a man his height.

It was that Hannibal hadn't been reflected in the mirror.

“Will, are you listening?”

Hannibal’s voice.

Will blinked, trying to focus. Yes, they were in the library. Hannibal had asked about other properties he was interested in. How long had they been there?

“Yes, sorry, I couldn’t sleep,” he gave as an explanation. It wasn’t exactly the truth. He had slept, but no matter how much sleep he got, he was just as tired. His headache grew with every day that passed.

“Will, I know you were scheduled to leave in two days, but you’re clearly ill. I would feel better if you stayed until you felt more fit for travel. It is not a short journey, nor an easy one.”

Will wanted to argue, but he was thinking of the carriages, the trains, the passing motels, and felt so incredibly tired.

“Abigail... she will be waiting for me.”

“Write her a letter, explain to her you are sick and will stay here between two weeks and month, to make sure you are in the perfect state to travel when the time comes.”

“You think it can take a month?” Will might not have been the doctor in this situation, but if he was so sick, he surely should go to the hospital instead.

“I don’t think so, no, but better to be cautious, that way your sister won’t have any reason to worry. She’s good where she is, yes?”

Everything sounded so easy when Hannibal said it, so logical that Will couldn’t help but agree.

“Yes, she’s with Alana. She’s good there.”

“Alana? Is that a friend of Abigail’s?” the man asked, taking Will’s papers from his hands after deciding they’d done enough work for the day.

“She’s a family friend, you could say. Eight years older than Abigail. She’s always helped her with the feminine stuff I don’t know about. Her parents helped us a lot after ours died.”

“You never tried to court her?”

Will tried to pay attention to the conversation. He felt like he was missing something, like Hannibal was having another conversation he wasn't aware of or lacked the information to understand.

"Her parents thought I would, and I thought about it. Alana is as close to being the perfect woman as one can get. She's really wonderful, though she's always been a bit scared of me. She doesn't feel that I'm stable." Will laughed with bitterness at that. He wasn't mad at Alana, but he couldn't help it. "She's not the only one. There's this common misconception that I'm about to break, or something. No one really sees me as the strong, reliable, stoic man that women want."

"Did you not raise your sister by yourself? One would think there's no better indicator of stability than a good parent."

"You assume I was a good parent."

"Were you not?"

"I like to think I was, yes," he confessed. "But not everyone agrees. As wonderfully as Abigail fits in and is endearing to everyone around her, she's never felt as if she belongs, which means that sometimes she will do things to put people off on purpose. Of course everyone thinks that's my fault, somehow."

"You've never told her to stop?"

"Not really, so I guess it may be my fault, in a way. I just think that it would be hypocritical, considering I do the same. I trust her to know when to behave, and she does well…mostly. She's excitable when it comes to morbid article clippings in the paper. But other than that, she's good at convincing people she's what a perfect girl of her age should be."

"Do you think I might meet her once I move to London? I feel I could learn a lot about you by watching you interact with the person who is clearly most dearest to you."

It was a weird thing for the man to say. It made it sound like Will was some wild animal that Hannibal wanted to observe in its natural habitat. He wondered if it was due only to some of that awkwardness that came with speaking a different language or if Hannibal was just that unapologetic in his way of thinking.

Will wished he could be the same.

"Sure. She'll probably be dying to meet the first friend I've ever made by myself." It was until the words fell out of his mouth that he realized what he had said.

Friend. He had called Hannibal a friend. Half of him wanted to take it back, afraid of the possible rejection. The other half wanted to push further, to see how much he could get away with when assuming the nature of their relationship.

Hannibal would likely be rooting for the latter option.

“It’s a high honor to be your friend, I’ve come to understand.” From any other person it would sound mocking, but Hannibal made it feel so sincere, as if he truly thought of being Will’s friend as an honor.

There was something wrong with Hannibal, Will had decided. Too many things felt off. Too many pieces floated around Will’s brain that didn’t fit together in any logical way.

He had never had a real friend, though.

And so, once again, Will let all those troubling thoughts fade.

*Dear Abigail,*

*I’m afraid I’ve come down with some sickness, as I’ve spent the last few days very tired and with a fever that comes and goes. Count Lecter, the gracious host he is, has insisted I extend my stay for at least a few weeks. As I mentioned in my previous letter, he’s a doctor, and so he takes health very seriously.*

*I’m sorry I haven’t written more, but the Castle is in the middle of nowhere and so I don’t have much opportunity to send letters, but I assure you that I’m okay, and once I get better, I will return.*

*I hope you’re being a good guest. Give my regards to Alana.*

*With love,*

*Your brother, Will.*

Will stared at the letter, willing it to give him answers he didn’t have.

“Is your letter ready, Will? I have one to send your boss explaining that I’ve come up with more ideas and questions, and therefore have asked you to extend your stay. There shouldn’t be any trouble on that front.”

“Yeah, I just, uh, need to put the date.” He didn’t know how to say the words.

Hannibal seemed to understand anyway. He took the letter and wrote with his own pen the date before beginning to fold the letter.

“It’s May 15th, Will. You arrived here twelve days ago.”

“Yes, right. Sorry, it’s just that with how bad I’m sleeping...”

“Don’t worry about it,” insisted Hannibal. “Tomorrow I’ll be gone all day. I’ve left enough pre-prepared food for you, so please don’t skip any meals. A good alimentation and good rest are the most effective medicines.”

“Yes, doctor. Don’t worry, I won’t ruin your reputation by dying under your watch,” Will joked, even though he was simultaneously aware it wasn’t really funny.

Hannibal smiled anyway. His smiles came easier each day. It made something inside of Will flutter. Hannibal put both of his hands on Will’s cheeks, a gesture too intimate for just friends, Will knew, but the comfort it gave him overpowered any shame.

One day he dreamed he was trapped. He tried to open every door in the castle but none of them budged. The principal door was locked, and the dozens of doors he was told not to open were also locked. The door to his own room, which he had been in barely moments ago, was found tightly locked. He started panicking, to the point he considered jumping out of a window, which he found was not locked.

He looked out to find at least fifteen wolves surrounding the castle, guarding it. Will doubted he would have as much luck as he’d had the first time.

When he finally woke up, in his bedroom, this time, his bed was wet with his sweat. His fever must have gotten worse over the course of the night.

When he mentioned it to Hannibal, however, he seemed much more interested in the dream.

“Do you feel trapped, Will?”

“That would be rude, considering how much I’ve been imposing, as a guest.”

“It’s no imposition at all, I assure you. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

Will gave the question proper thought, as it deserved.

“Yes, but I can’t point out why. Must be some resentment towards my own body for keeping me here,” he explained with honesty.

Hannibal had that look on his face, that look of delight when he saw something in Will, recognized something Will wasn’t comfortable with.

“You are used to not only being independent, but to also having people rely on you. It must be troubling to find yourself at the mercy of your sickness.”

“You can say that again,” agreed Will, taking another shot of whiskey. Hannibal had advised against drinking alcohol before going to bed, but Will knew his own nightmares enough to know they would come with or without any help, so the whiskey at least made more attractive the idea of going to sleep.

The days passed in a blur. Will would blink at dinner to find that his eyes opened to dinner the next day. Memories of what happened in between were few and foggy, but he was almost certain that Hannibal had shown interest in a few more properties in London.

Will must have done a good enough job with his work, as Hannibal had decided to buy them, though he couldn’t remember doing the paperwork.

Then, one night, in his now permanent state of exhaustion, Will forgot to close his door.

Will opened his eyes, suddenly aware of the feeling of a pair of lips against his throat.

“ *Hannibal*… ” he managed to gasp. Even before he opened his eyes he knew who it was, and not just because they were alone in the castle. It was that even in the midst of the situation, Will could recognize the dizzying feeling he always felt around the man.

Hannibal didn’t answer in words, but immediately after he felt the sharp pain of teeth puncturing his throat. Just a moment of pain followed by the most intense pleasure Will had ever felt. He felt as if electricity had been injected into his veins and it had rushed in a second all the way to his heart.

His heart. It was beating too hard. Its beats were abnormally strong, but it didn’t hurt. Instead it added to the overwhelming amount of sensations Will’s brain was trying to process, with little to no success.

Will took his hands to Hannibal’s hair, running his fingers through it until he had a good grasp. Not knowing if he should try to push the man away or pull him closer, he did nothing.

He started to think he may be dying. It would make sense, after all.

Hannibal had one hand on Will’s shoulder, probably to keep him from moving away, as if Will had any agency at the moment, and the other one had slipped under his nightshirt to caress the lower part of his chest.

Will couldn’t say he would mind dying like this.

Hannibal's mouth finally parted from Will's neck and he faced the other man, his mouth still red with blood. Will was sure he should say something—anything, really—but Hannibal beat him to it.

"Go back to sleep, Will, this was only a dream."

The next time Will opened his eyes (and this time he was sure he was waking up), he was alone in his room. He looked to the door and found it perfectly closed. He hadn't closed his door, as far as he could remember. He refrained from standing up just to go touch the door and make sure it existed at all.

He had no mirrors, but it was still dark outside. If he lit a candle he could probably check his neck in the reflection of his window, just to make sure nothing was there.

He lit the candle, but he didn't go to the window.

He took his journal, deciding he would throw it to the nearest fire as soon as he was back home, and tried to write down what happened. His dream. He wasn't sure it felt like a dream, but much of the waking world felt like a dream to him nowadays, and he knew he couldn't trust himself to tell the difference.

It felt grounding to write it all down. It also made it all seem that much more surreal. But those were dreams, weren't they? Will had had his fair share of strange dreams since he had arrived. If he could manage to look Hannibal in the eyes later, then it should all be okay. Will was an expert at suppressing his shame.

It had been better than the nightmares, though. That much he could admit. He felt tired, and cold, but not terrified. What did it say about him, that being bled out was a comforting dream?

Later that day, when they were together if Hannibal felt that Will was acting strange, he didn't let it be known. The comforting familiarity of their companionship drowned any awkwardness he might have felt otherwise.

It was nice. Really nice. And if Will let Hannibal get away with more innocent touches, or got distracted by his lips on more than one occasion, no one would ever be the wiser.

Sometimes he wondered if he had ever woken up at all.

He left his door open the next night. It was better than the nightmares.

"Do you ever think about death, Will?" Hannibal asked. It was just the type of questions he asked, and it was fine for Will. At least it wasn't small talk.

"Mine? Not really."

"And others'?"

That's where the question became trickier. Hannibal always found a way to expose the darkest corners of Will's mind.

"A few years ago there was a serial killer in London, and he was never caught. For months it was the only thing the papers talked about. Abigail kept each and every article about it, for her collection. They called him Jack the Ripper." Will took another sip of his whiskey. Hannibal joined with a sip of the red wine he always drank.

He was patient for Will to continue, trusting he would reach his point eventually.

"Even though it was all anyone ever thought about, it wasn't polite conversation. Definitely nothing a thirteen-year-old girl should discuss in public. So, Abigail discussed it with me. Every new development or theory the journalists could come up with." Will frowned down at his glass. It was difficult to explain what happened. "She likes to talk about murders with me because I sometimes just... get into their head. It's easy for me to put myself in their shoes. It's like suddenly I know what they must have been thinking. I just... see the clues in things that everyone else usually ignores."

Another sip to his drink. He had never talked about this with anyone. Not even with Abigail. She just... knew what he did and accepted it. It was never something they talked about.

"But sometimes I just get too deep in their heads, and I see *myself* committing those murders. Especially when I'm asleep. Every night for months I dreamt of myself as the Ripper, killing each of those women, seeing death cloud their eyes. Abigail offered to stop sharing the details with me, but the dreams didn't bother me that much. What bothered me was..."

"...that they didn't bother you more?" Hannibal guessed. Will nodded, brain buzzing with happiness at being understood.

Hannibal seemed contemplative, probably trying to make an analysis of what those dreams could mean. Will could say it just meant that he should stay away from newspapers (which he wouldn't), but he gave Hannibal his implicit permission to be analyzed by staying silent.

Hannibal didn't say anything of the sort, though.

"And how do you feel, waking up from those dreams?"

Will didn't have to think about it.

"Powerful."

He started fantasizing about those nights when awake. Soft lips against his skin, gentle hands exploring his body, soft hair between his fingers.

Maybe he was sick, after all. He couldn't remember thinking that way about a man before in his life. *Or* about a woman, for that matter. But in those moments, both sitting in front of the fire, there wasn't much else Will could think about. It was exactly that, however, that made him realize something.

Hannibal looked younger than he had when Will had first arrived. Back then Will had thought he looked to be about fifty, now he looked as if he could be in his early forties. There were fewer wrinkles in his face and hands, and his hair looked blonder and less white.

Will wondered if he had finally lost it.

There wasn't anything in particular that had triggered Will's decision to look through his journal; he just did it.

The most recent entries were barely legible, his handwriting having deteriorated. It was many pages back, however, where he began to grow concerned. He had given up on putting the date in each entry, but even before that there wasn't a linear chronology to the dates. He would put the same date three or four entries in a row, and he would then put a previous date on the next entry before skipping more days to the next entry, even though he was reasonably sure he had written at least once a day.

He found the entry of the day he wrote his last letter to Abigail. It was dated May 15th. It was the third entry dated May 15th. The date before that had been May 23rd.

It was with absolute horror that Will realized he had no idea how long he had been at Castle Lecter, but he suspected it was way more than the month and a half that Hannibal had assured him would be the maximum.

He left the door open again, fearing that closing it now could give away his doubts. That, of course, meant he had to accept that the nightly visits might be more real than he wanted to believe.

Not being able to fall asleep, he heard Hannibal talking just outside his room with somebody else. A woman, it was obvious, and the fact that they sounded so well acquainted bothered Will more than the fact that no one else was supposed to be there.

“How long will you keep playing with your pet, Hannibal? I’ve never known you to be so... infatuated with someone before. You should know better.”

“I don’t appreciate the insinuation that I don’t know what I’m doing, Bedelia.”

“I’m just saying that you may be overestimating the control you have over the situation. You could just kill him and have your problem solved, and yet you haven’t. Why?”

“I don’t have to justify my actions to you.”

Will didn’t hear the woman walk away, but he knew she was gone now. He almost expected the man to walk in, make a repeat act of all their previous nights, but he didn’t.

Will couldn’t sleep that night, but when the first rays of sun came through his window, he knew this might be his only chance at escaping.

He stood up as silently as he could. He had never seen Hannibal during the day, and just now he wondered how he had never thought more of it.

Will remembered one distant dream, where he had tried every door in the castle just to find them all locked, and so he wasn’t the least bit surprised when he tried the main entrance and found it locked, just as he had suspected. The service door was locked, too. Will felt the momentary urge to try every door in the castle, but it felt too much like deja-vu.

Perhaps that also hadn’t been a dream. Maybe nothing here had been a dream, and life outside was the dream he kept trying to run to.

He almost let himself embrace that idea, if not for a letter he saw sitting on the counter. It was addressed to Abigail.

He opened and found it written completely in his calligraphy, illegible as it was. Everything but the date, penned in Hannibal’s now-familiar handwriting.

*June 29th.*

Will's hands were shaking. He hadn't written that letter. At least, he didn't remember writing that letter. But if the date was correct, then there were lots of things he couldn't remember, weren't they?

"Will, are you okay? You're shivering," asked Hannibal from behind him. Will jumped and turned around, not even bothering to hide the letter in his hand. He glanced at the window; it was dark outside already.

It didn't make any sense.

"What is this?"

"You wrote a letter for your sister yesterday, to tell her you were on your way, if you remember. I was going to take you back to the town tomorrow so you could start your journey home."

Will just shook his head. Nothing about that made sense. He couldn't remember anything about a conversation about going back. Besides, he had been staying here because he wasn't well enough for the journey back, so why would Hannibal send him away now that he couldn't even stay awake more than a few hours at a time?

He was lying. He had to be lying. He wasn't planning on letting him go.

The letter fell from his hand. Hannibal took a step closer, reaching with his hand, and Will had to fight against the part of him that wanted to surrender to the touch, anticipating the comfort it would bring him.

He took a step back.

"Please don't lie to me," he cried, desperate.

"Will, please, calm down. Why do you think I'm lying?"

"The date. The dreams. The sickness. *What are you doing to me* ?" he asked, and before Hannibal could give him an answer, he asked again, " *What is happening to me* ?"

As much as he tried to think clearly, his brain seemed to be on fire, every thought painful to approach.

"Will–" but Will didn't let Hannibal finish. He ran back to his room, and to his relief, found that door still unlocked. He locked it behind him, even though he knew it was to no avail.

He took his journal from his desk and put it in the pocket of his jacket.

If his dream hadn't been a dream—or at least not completely—then he already knew his only possible escape.

He opened the window and started climbing down. Castle Lecter was old and its walls irregular, but Will managed to climb down and a bit to the east to a small balcony on a lower floor. From there he was reasonably sure he could jump to the river that ran alongside it.

As soon as his feet landed on the balcony, as if anticipating the move, the doors opened, Hannibal coming through them.

“Will, I don’t know what you think is happening, but you need to calm down. You could have killed yourself climbing down the way you did.”

“As opposed to letting you kill me yourself?”

Hannibal looked almost hurt, and Will didn’t like that. He didn’t want to hurt Hannibal. He should want to hurt Hannibal. He wanted to *hate* Hannibal, so why couldn't he?

“I don’t want you dead, Will, can’t you trust that?”

“Why would I? You have been lying to me, doing God knows what to my brain since I arrived.”

“You have been happier, haven’t you?”

*‘Yes*,’ Will wanted to say, but he bit his tongue, not allowing himself to say it.

“Does it count if it was all a lie?”

“It wasn’t a lie, Will. I really enjoy your company, as you do mine.” Hannibal extended his hand, “Come back inside, Will, and we can discuss whatever it is that is troubling you.”

Will wanted to take the hand offered—he really wanted to—but he knew that if he ever put another foot inside of that castle again, he would never leave.

*Would that be really that bad, though?*

He wanted to. He really wanted to.

Good thing he was very good at denying himself.

Before Hannibal could react, Will jumped into the river.

# Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Taking one last look at Alana's notes, Abigail finished typing and added the page to the increasing pile on her desk. Although Alana had insisted Abigail needed not to help her, there was not much else she could do to fight her boredom.

Alana was a teacher, she loved being surrounded by kids. She didn't need it, her parents were well-off, but she had always loved being able to work and prove herself capable. It was one of the many things Will and Abigail liked about Alana.

With now the school year coming to a close, Alana had enough work so that Abigail could lend her a hand by transcribing her notes in the typing machine, an ability Will had endorsed her to learn as it could be useful to whatever her future had prepared for her.

Alana had agreed, saying it could be a way for Abigail to be helpful to her future husband. Will didn't say otherwise but also didn't explicitly agree with it. He knew better than to believe Abigail had already resigned herself to the boring life of a city wife.

One of the many reasons Abigail loved her brother.

She agreed, though, with the usefulness of an ability like this one, and although she was fairly quick when transcribing, it was the least she could do, in her opinion, considering how long she had now imposed in the Bloom residence.

Way longer than she had intended to. It had been weeks

since she had last heard from her brother, and she couldn't help but be worried about him. Alana tried to reassure her, but it didn't help much.

A knock on her door distracted her from her thoughts.

"Come in," she called.

"Abigail, you won't believe the day I just had," started Alana the moment she came in. Ever since Lady Margot had left for Spain, Abigail became Alana's closest friend, which didn't mean much, as Abigail didn't consider herself particularly close to anyone but her brother, but she so enjoyed the privileged gossip that came with being the best friend of someone of the upper class.

"I certainly won't if you don't start telling," answered Abigail with the same giddiness.

"Today I received not one but three marriage proposals, can you believe it? Of course, not all of those were exactly welcome, but still, you understand my day has been nothing short of crazy."

Abigail gave a conspiring smile, imagining what a day dear Alana had.

"And will I find out if you accepted one of those? Or should I wait for the wedding invitation to find out?"

"Of course, you won't have to wait, but let me tell you the story in order, lest I forget any detail to this day. I've rejected many proposals over the years, but they were always distant one from the other, enough so that with time passed I can remember each."

"Please, Alana, you're killing me with the intrigue, won't you start the story?"

"Yes, of course. The first one was just before lunch. No other than Doctor Chilton joined me, and he wasted no time in making his intentions known. You do remember Doctor Chilton, right?"

Abigail nodded, trying not to show the disgust on her face. Doctor Chilton was a ridiculous man with delusions of grandeur and a fragile ego that Will hurt more than once. As a result, he had told everyone who listened that Will would be more at home at the asylum he managed than in polite society.

He had never been as direct in his resentment towards Abigail, but she knew it existed and it was mutual.

"You can take that expression off your face, Abigail, I rejected his proposal. I can't stand him any more than you or Will can, and he tried to assure me that were I to marry him, I could improve the company I find myself with." Alana had an exasperated look on her face, she certainly hadn't liked that comment. "We parted on good terms, all being said, and he looked quite broken-hearted, but I can't feel bad for him."

"Neither can I," added Abigail.

"The second proposal was after lunch, and it was if you can believe it, by someone worse." Alana's face showed not only disgust but also barely disguised rage. Even if she was the perfect picture of politeness, with Abigail she allowed herself a bit more freedom with her emotions.

That extent of emotions gave Abigail a very good idea of who was that second proposal from.

"Please don't say Mason Verger," begged Abigail, even if she knew already she had hit the blank.

"The one and only. I'm afraid I wasn't nearly as polite when rejecting him as I was with Doctor Chilton, that man gets on my nerves in the worst way possible. I did manage some civility, as any woman should, but only that."

Abigail ignored how the second part seemed to be a bit of an indirect for her. She had yet to get a marriage proposal, but Alana somehow was already sure it would end in disaster.

The worst part was that Will agreed with her, and what worse betrayal could there be?

Forgetting herself for a moment, Abigail does the same comment she would've if she was talking with her brother.

"If only you could have married his sister, you liked her much better."

It took her a moment to realize her mistake, and she just realized it because Alana looked somewhere between mortified and scandalized.

"Abigail, never do that kind of comment again, it's indecent."

"But accurate?" She pushed, having already screwed up, she could at least clear the air in that regard.

It took Alana a moment, but in the end, she let her righteousness go, to get a more resigned look on her face

"How did you know?"

"Will suspected for a long time, but we only really found out when I happened to come across you two in a less than innocent position in the stables."

"And you told Will?" Abigail took air to begin to defend herself because really, telling Will was telling no one, but Alana raised a hand to interrupt her. "I'm not mad you did, I know you two have no secrets, I'm just surprised. That means he knew when he offered to marry Margot, didn't he?"

"Yes, and he told her, so there was no misunderstanding that there were no expectations to fulfill, uh, her role as wife, were she to accept."

"Then why didn't she agree?"

Abigail looked down, suddenly not able to match her gaze. That morning had been a complete embarrassment for anyone involved.

*"Thank you for inviting me for breakfast, but I most wonder if there was any motive behind it. You two are not exactly known for your propensity to have people over," said Margot, as she finished her food.*

*Will looked at Abigail, who was already looking back. They had talked about this, Will would never take a decision of this caliber without her blessing.*

*"We heard your father gave you one year to get married, or he would arrange a marriage with one of his friends." The word friends were almost spit. Everyone knew what kind of men Lord Verger surrounded himself with.*

*Margot immediately understood where this going, as Abigail expected. She still seemed uncertain, and Abigail could only guess she was already considering her answer.*

*She really hoped it would be a no.*

*"Is this a marriage proposal, then? I must admit that between every proposal I've had, I've never had the little sister present for it."*

*It was not a complaint, just a statement, giving herself time to think. Will shrugged, knowing Margot didn't care. Abigail frowned at being called 'the little sister'. She knew that technically, that was all she was, and with fourteen years it was not even incorrect to use the adjective little, but she didn't like the implication that she wouldn't be as affected by whatever was agreed in here as Will and Margot.*

*"It's an opportunity for you to get married to someone that won't expect anything a husband expects of his wife of you."*

*"What kind of duties won't you expect?"*

*"Ask Alana," Abigail intervened, "she has a fascinating lecture on what a man expects of a wom– auch," she was interrupted by a kick in her sheen.*

*She looked back at her brother, who was looking at her as if he was just about to send her to her room. Abigail couldn't be sure he wasn't just about to do that when Margot interrupted their wordless conversation.*

*"You know. About me and Alana." Again, not a question, just a statement.*

*"Yes," answered Abigail, before taking a cookie from the table to start eating, a sign to her brother that she would shut up now. At least temporarily.*

*"So you're helping me, helping Alana, and what are you getting out of this?"*

*Will looked down at his plate, knowing he didn't have an answer. Abigail was tempted to answer that they were getting troubles, but she had agreed to this after all, it would be rude now to talk ill of their decisions.*

*"I think," kept going Margot, "you both hate the idea. Even if I marry, I'm still part of the Verger family, I would be expected to attend social and family events, both of which you would hate. My father would want to drag you into the family business, with all his dirty tactics you would end up accepting, you would be condemning yourself to a life you hate. Besides, isn't Abigail always saying she wants to travel? To see the world? That's easier if you're a bachelor, it's not like you got any more family expecting you to marry."*

*Abigail tried, she really tried to stop the sad smile from creeping up her face, but in the end, she couldn't help it. Everything Margot said, they knew, and Abigail knew even more.*

*Abigail knew Will wouldn't ever have again a home where he could just relax if he married. Even if he considered Margot a good friend, she was exhausting to be around for him, just as everyone else. He couldn't be himself with her, he didn't dare, and if he married Abigail was*

*sure she would see her brother put on a suit of politeness he would never again take off, leaving the true him forgotten somewhere inside.*

*But she couldn't tell him that, could she? It would sound like a little girl jealous of the idea her brother's attention would be divided.*

*It wasn't that, she knew Will would always put her first, but she wanted him to put himself first too. He too wanted to travel, he too wanted to run far away from this city, he just wouldn't let himself to even dream about it, easier to say it was just a dream of his little sister.*

*"We have thought of the consequences of the marriage, we both agree we can accept them if it means helping you."*

*Margot sighed, clearly conflicted. It was an out from her current problems and a good one at that, but she still seemed reluctant.*

*"Was your proposal to Alana anything like this? Because then I can see why she rejected you." It was said in good spirits, but it still held a bit of bitterness.*

*"Not at all," answered Will, half laughing," that one was a disaster of a separated nature. I proposed to Alana because by then everyone expected it of me, and she is everything one could ask in a wife. She rejected me because I have none of the qualities a woman looks for in a husband. You don't want a husband, though, you want a façade."*

*Margot contemplated that answer. Will talked about Alana being the perfect wife as he talked about the weather, a few facts that had nothing to do with personal opinion nor did they affect them in any way.*

*"I was there too if that's what you're wondering," added Abigail to break the tension.*

*It had been awkward in every possible way, and Abigail had been hoping for Alana to reject him for the same reasons he wanted Margot to reject him, plus the fact that she had been ten years at the time, and Alana would've definitely taken a role in her raising that Margot had no interest in taking, even if just for compromise, and ten-year-old Abigail understood enough that she wasn't meant to be the society wife Alana would have tried to shape her into.*

*She really liked Alana, but she had enough of her lectures for inappropriate behavior when they visited, she dreaded that those visits would be permanent and that those lectures would become actual orders to correct her behavior.*

*Margot smiled. She made eye contact with Abigail, because it was impossible to do so with Will, and Abigail could finally relax. Margot's eyes told her everything she needed, and she just felt the smallest guilt at once again feeling victorious when his brother was about to get rejected.*

*"As charming as I find the self-sacrificing act, I'm afraid I'll have to reject your proposal. I don't want to drag anyone into my misery, especially not my friends." Margot stood up,*

*making it clear she would not change her mind. "I'll find someone else to marry that is... understanding to my situation, and that would also benefit from the marriage."*

*Will stood up, Abigail guessed to at least accompany Margot to her carriage as a good host, but she just shook her head and told him to sit back.*

*"For future reference, I do recommend you keep bringing Abigail to your proposals, she clearly knows better than you what's best for this family."*

*After that, she walked out, leaving Abigail and Will to sit in their garden, with what little was left of breakfast in front of them.*

*"Anything you want to say to that, Abby?"*

*She took a small piece of bread left on her plate and throw it his way, her revenge for being called that. It was how their parents used to call her, but Will had always called her Abigail. She liked it that way.*

*"I assure you, dear brother, I have no idea what she was talking about."*

Abigail didn't want to tell Alana that she may have been the culprit, so she gave a light-hearted answer, meant to be taken as a joke.

"Oh, you know, she said she couldn't in good conscience condemn a friend to be related to Mason."

Alana laughed at that, and let the topic go. Abigail relaxed, having just dodged a bullet.

"Yeah, well, I guess that by marrying a Spaniard he at least doesn't have to actually deal with Mason," joked Alana.

Margot had found herself a suitable husband a few months after she rejected Will, a traveler from Spain that Will and Abigail suspected to be in a similar position to Margot.

A mutually convenient marriage, she had said.

Abigail didn't write her much, and Will didn't at all, but she send them small letters on their birthdays, and so Abigail did the same. From what little she had told them, she was happy enough in Spain, and Abigail was happy for her.

"So, those are two marriage proposals, am I getting details for the third?"

Alana, who had been smiling radiantly thinking of Margot, went back to a more reserved expression. Not a sad one, though, and Abigail had to remind herself that Alana had been ready for this life for years, resigned and maybe even content in a way Abigail didn't think she could ever be.

"The third was Lord Stucliff, do you know him?"

Abigail tried to remember, she was sure she had heard the name.

"Isn't he a friend of Chilton?" She finally asked, more or less able to put a face to the name.

"Yes, but he is much more tolerable, I promise."

"Dear Lord, 'much more tolerable'? Try not to sound too in love my friend, I could swear I've seen you more enthusiastic about breakfast," chastised Abigail in a bad impression of Alana, as it was the type of complaining the older woman usually had for her.

Alana's smile was warm but also a bit sad, and that was when Abigail realized she had just signed herself up for another lecture on how to properly choose a husband.

"He's a good man, he has a good career. He agrees with me being a schoolmistress, too busy with his work to really care if I spend my whole day in the house or not. At least until we have children. And he doesn't have a personal vendetta towards my two closest friends, which is almost close to a miracle, considering Will and you have little to no care for whom you offend, which means I can actually invite both of you to the wedding."

A small part of Abigail, that part that wanted to be cruel every time she saw a vulnerability, wanted to ask her why hadn't she married Will then. It was a dumb question to ask, as Abigail hadn't wanted her to accept, but she knew she could hurt Alana by asking.

Will hadn't been the prince from the fairytales she had wanted, he wasn't the type of man from romance novels, but he would have treated Alana better than any of her current suitors. Back then, though, Alana had a fantasy of the perfect man coming for her, a fantasy Abigail suspected had been shattered after Margot.

She was now trying to be practical about marriage, and Abigail longed to push because she knew that deep down Alana now regretted rejecting Will. She longed to push because she knew it would hurt.

She didn't want to hurt Alana, though, and so the temptations to do so only because she could pass, allowing her to continue a more polite conversation.

"Do you think he will keep as respectful of your choices once you marry? It is known that naïve girls get tricked into an awful marriage with a few sweet promises." It was a genuine concern, Alana deserved to be happy in her marriage.

"I know he will, I know this type of man. Too focused on their work, you just have to be agreeable to put a nice face in public and keep up appearances. And any idea I have I just have to frame it as if it was his idea for him to be agreeable," explained Alana.

Abigail smiled. "You are saying you just have to know how to manipulate your husband to your advantage."

"I would never say something so crude. I'm just passing on to you the knowledge on how to best deal with your husband that my mother passed on to me. It's the kind of knowledge Will

can't teach you."

Abigail thought of telling Alana that Will was the best at manipulation, and had thought her his ways as well as he could, considering she didn't have his gift to read people, but Alana looked happy of having a moment where she thought she was obliging with her self imposed duty of covering the deficiencies her raising may have because of the lack of a feminine parental figure. Abigail decided to let her have her moment.

"Have you told your mother yet?" She asked, as Alana's father was out of the city at the moment, he wouldn't come back until the next afternoon.

Alana's eyes shined with excitement.

"No, come with me, I need you to do adequate reactions to my story, you know my mother is too stoic for funny gossip."

She stood up and took Abigail's hand, and the younger girl let herself be dragged in search of Lady Bloom.

At least she could shake off the worry for her brother for the day.

Abigail stepped down from the carriage, relieved to finally be at the Bloom state, as it was as close to home as she could get at the moment.

The ball had been a beautiful thing, Mrs. Schurr having done a wonderful job planning the eighteen birthday of Abigail’s friend, Marissa. Alana would be delighted to hear Abigail had even danced with a few guys herself.

She would skip the part about how most of them seemed to have more of a morbid curiosity about her and her brother than a genuine interest in her, Alana didn’t need to know that. Besides, a few guys did show a more genuine interest, but Abigail feared that it was more of a rebellion against their parents, as she knew she hardly was someone parents approved of.

Not even Mrs. Shurr approved of her friendship with Marissa, and she could only guess how much Marissa had insisted until her mother gave in.

Marissa was amazing like that, always set to get her way, and once she made up her mind, no one could change her opinions. That was how she ended up sticking as Abigail’s only other friend than Alana, even against her mother’s wishes.

Abigail had always treasured her time with Marissa, and this afternoon hadn’t been the exception, but it made all the more obvious how less time they had spent together than usual.

Marissa had been so excited to dance with every single bachelor at the party, had decided that now she was eighteen it was only a matter of time until she found a guy good enough to marry.

It had hurt a bit, even if Abigail knew it was coming. Marissa, having realized her more somber mood, assured her they would still be friends after she married. After they both married.

“You are only a few months younger, dear, it’s only a matter of time, and if you set your mind to using your charm to attract men instead of scaring them, you may even beat me to it.” Those had been Marissa’s words, and Abigail had never wanted to run away more.

It had hurt that her dear friend prioritized meeting more possible suitors over her, but the reminder that it was expected of her to do the same almost pushed her to a panic attack.

The once big salon now felt too claustrophobic for her, it was hard to even breathe. She only danced with one guy after that, and she felt her skin crawl wherever she could feel his hands.

She had wanted to run, go back home, not the Bloom state but her actual home, go with Will who would hug her and promise her she didn’t have to do anything she didn’t want to, and she would argue that she really needed to accept that life, but something in her heart would settle because she knew Will wouldn’t be disappointed in her if she couldn’t do it.

She couldn’t do that, and even if she could, she wouldn’t, because it would be rude to leave so early without a good reason and even if she didn’t usually care for that, this was Marissa and she didn’t want to sour her birthday in any way. When the time to leave came, she hugged her friend goodbye and had the certainty this was the last time she saw her like this, as someone Abigail could consider hers.

From then on, Marissa would be chased by men, she would be being courted, and that was all she would ever talk about, and Abigail would have to take a step back and just be the weird friend with the weird brother and be glad if she got an invite to the wedding.

If she was home, she would allow herself to cry, but she wasn’t home, so she entered the house with a smile on her face that no one would be able to see through.

No one except Will, but he still wasn’t there.

She walked to the sitting room, wanting to greet whoever was there before going to her bedroom to be miserable in private.

She wasn’t surprised when she saw Alana with Lord Stucliff. Since the beginning of the engagement, she had met the man a few times here and there, and been to a few breakfasts as a plus one for Alana’s family. She didn’t like him, and she was sure it was mutual, but they had been civil enough that Alana hadn’t realized, and that was good enough for Abigail.

“Alana, Lord Stucliff, sorry for the interruption, I was just passing to say hello,” she greeted, wanting to end the conversation as soon as possible.

“You’re not interrupting at all, Abigail, did you have fun at Marissa’s birthday?” Asked Alana. Sutcliffe just nodded to the greeting, probably feeling he was too good to talk with her.

“Yes, it was lovely, I’ll tell you all about it later, please continue to enjoy your afternoon.” She was turning to leave the room when Alana called for her again.

“Oh, Abigail, there’s something for you in your room that I think you’ll love.” She had a very bright smile that let Abigail know Alana was sincere and that she thought Abigail would be happy about it.

“Do I get a clue?” She asked in return, wanting to prepare herself to have an adequate reaction and not let her down even if she didn’t like it.

Alana thought it over for a second, before deciding against keeping the mystery.

“A letter for you. From Will.”

That was all Abigail needed before turning and running to her bedroom. She could hear Alana scream something about not running inside the house, but she couldn’t help it.

Stepping inside her bedroom she immediately saw the letter on her bed, Will’s horrible handwriting on it.

It had somehow gotten worse since his last letter, but Abigail couldn’t bring herself to care. It was Will.

It was short, just telling her he would part the next day back to London. It was dated June 29th, but just like the last time, the date wasn’t in his handwriting.

That was seven days ago, which meant he started his journey back six days ago.

Abigail could almost cry with relief, it would be just a few days longer until he came back and they could resume their life in their house in the middle of nowhere with just the least amount of contact with London’s society as they could. She let herself fall back into her bed.

Soon, soon she would go back home.

“I’m so sorry I’m ruining our time together with my worry, Marissa, it’s just that according to his letter, Will should have been here over a week ago,” apologized Abigail.

She was at the Shurr house, having been invited over for tea. She has spent the last two hours listening to Marissa’s exciting last two weeks since her birthday. Just as expected, many men had fallen in line to try and court her, trying to get a few hours of her time. The evidence that their friendship hadn’t hurt Marissa’s options for possible suitors had gone a long way into her mother agreeing to this visit, even when before Abigail had seldom been allowed there.

But for all her friend’s joy, she had eventually noticed Abigail’s anguish, and Abigail had told her all about Will’s letters; how he had been sick, and then send her a letter that he would depart the next day, but that letter has been sent a bit over three weeks ago, and they still have no news on him.

“You are not ruining anything, Abigail, the point of tea is updating each other in our lives, and just as you have done a marvelous job hearing about my bliss, let me now share your worries,” reassured her Marissa, in that kind and genuine tone that warmed Abigail inside. Then, as a further show of support, she rested her hand over Abigail’s.

The contact gave Abigail small tingles in her skin, it was a wonderful feeling she was used to getting around her friend. It would be wonderful if it wasn’t a constant reminder that she would eventually lose her to her future husband. What a waste.

“Thank you, but there is nothing we can do about it, I prefer to get distracted from my misfortune when in your company.”

“Well, I think I can help you with that,” announced Marissa, picking up a newspaper that had been on the table since before Abigail arrived, and to which she hadn’t paid much attention. “My father came back from his business in America, he got this before his ship sailed back.”

Abigail took it and smiled immediately. An entire family was found murdered in their own homes, the picture was of them sitting in the dining room, faces down on the table, leaving up to her imagination how it must have looked.

She had begun a collection of morbid newspapers when she was around twelve years. Not all of them were about murders, but most were. It was mostly a secret, after all, it was not an appropriate interest for a lady, but Marissa and Alana were aware of it.

Sadness began creeping back into her chest, this was something she always shared with Will. Her brother had a prodigious mind that allowed him to think as the murderers, to reconstruct their crimes with as few details as the paper gave. On many occasions, he had guessed the culprit before the police.

Of course, all of that was a secret between them, Will needed not a worse reputation, nor did Abigail want him to be blamed for her interest. Just one more of their secrets.

She didn’t let it show that the thoughtful gift from her friend immersed her back into her troubles, she retained a cheerful smile with a faked innocence that always made Marissa

laugh.

“As if my birthday had come early, thank you so much, my friend, you truly know how to make me feel better,” thanked Abigail, before directing the conversation once again to her friend’s life.

She kept occasionally glancing at the paper, deciding that she would wait for Will to come back to read it. If he got any nightmares about it, then she would make him a favor and be a clingy little sister and insist on sleeping in his same bed.

Only a favor to him. Nothing to do with the distress she have begun to feel each day his absence persisted.

Two weeks later, and still, no news of her brother, Alana interrupted Abigail’s embroidery session with Lady Bloom. Normally, Abigail would be glad for it, as she found just sitting in silence with Lady Bloom while doing anything very tedious, but as her health had begun to decay, Lady Bloom had become less of the strict woman that had terrorized Abigail as a little girl, and more of a gentle woman who just wanted company now that her daughter was mostly occupied by her courting.

Abigail could relate to the woman’s loneliness.

After stealing Abigail and taking her to her room, Alana gave Abigail a newspaper.

“Nothing as violent as you usually like, I’m afraid, but people are most likely dead, and in quite the mysterious situation. Besides, it’s local,” explained Alana.

Abigail froze in her place. Alana, unlike Marissa who didn’t understand but didn’t judge either, was very vocally against Abigail's little hobby. She had not only lectured Abigail about how improper and damaging for the mind of a lady like her to read that, but she has also lectured Will about it, going so far as implying that he wasn’t taking proper care of her.

If she now was going so far as to bring her the news about some morbid happening, it meant not only that Abigail was no longer properly hiding her anxiety, but that Alana most likely shared it.

A tear fell from Abigail’s eye, followed by more and more, enough so that it got harder to see through them.

“You are also worried about Will,” said Abigail. He had tried to put some accusation in her voice, but her tone was worryingly flat.

Alana gave her a sad smile. “I always forget that trying to hide something for you is as useless as trying to hide it from him,” she said instead of answering, as they both knew Abigail was right. “Come here, we can read it together, although I do reserve my right to complain if I have nightmares later tonight.”

Abigail sat next to Alana, willing her tears to stop, and immersed herself in the article.

It was the front news of *The Dailygraph* , dated from that same day, August 9th. Apparently, a ship had arrived at the harbor with all of its cargo and none of its crew.

The most interesting part was without a doubt the transcription of the log book.

It started with nothing of importance, just a register of the cargo, of when they departed a location and details about the more technical part of the trip that escaped Abigail’s understanding and interest.

Ten days after the beginning, however, the first disappearance of the crew is reported. With that, the captain explained that everyone on board talked about there being something in the boat that made the disappearance not surprising at all, but refused to elaborate on what they meant by something. Then there were sightings of a strange man that was not part of the crew.

Then the weather had gotten worse, and another man disappeared. Then another one. Then another two. By the time a thick fog settled over the ship, only four people remained. Two of them disappeared quickly one after the other, leaving only the captain and the man who had first sighted the strange man.

He looked everywhere in the ship for said man, sure that it was him the author of their tragedy, and apparently, he found him, as after screaming in fear the man threw himself to the sea, leaving only the captain, who tied himself to the wheel, which was were he was found dead.

As a special extra detail, as soon as the ship touched the shore, an immense dog, perhaps even a wolf, sprang up on deck from below, to then jump on the sand before getting lost in the commotion.

“Oh, Alana, this is fascinating, a true mystery. What do you think happened? And where do you think the wolf came from? There was no mention of one being on board anywhere in the log book.” In her excitement, Abigail forgot herself and jumped to try and theorize what could have happened, forgetting Alana may not appreciate her nonchalance while talking of dead people.

To her delight, however, Alana looked just a bit reluctant, and every bit as curious as her.

“I would say the captain is the most obvious suspect for the crew disappearances, must have gone mad. I don’t think it was a wolf, just a big dog,” was her first answer, but after thinking

a bit more, said the following. “But I agree it’s hard to imagine one man overpowering another nine and be left without a scratch on his body. Not even from the dog.”

“If you are right, I can only imagine what kind of delusions a man must have to kill all his crew believing it was some strange man on board, and then just tie himself to the wheel with crosses in his hands, and stay there until death.”

Abigail walked to her closet and pulled out her collection, which was an elegant journal Will had given her. She opened it on a new page and pasted the article there before start making notes and all the details she considered relevant.

“If such horrors followed him, I hope in death he has found peace, even if he was indeed to blame for all those men who lost their lives.” Alana’s face was a mixture of pity, disgust, and that same curiosity Abigail had seen before.

Alana truly has such potential to be someone beyond the wife and mother she planned to be, and it was moments like this one where Abigail remembered it. She wished she could push her a bit more, but it would only make her close up. Besides, now that she was officially taking a husband, it was a bit too late.

“I wonder what Will would think of this,” said Abigail, because she suspected Alana was reaching her limit on what she would allow herself to deviate from proper.

Abigail found herself surrounded by the arms of the older woman a moment later, and all the tears that had stopped while reading the article came back in full force.

“It will be okay, Abigail, Will would never leave you, you are his little sister,” Alana tried to placate her. “He would let nothing keep him from coming back for you.”

It did not make Abigail feel better, as she was aware that such things existed that would indeed keep him away, like dying, but she let Alana keep whispering nonsense into her hair and hugged back, taking what comfort she could from her friend.

Later that night, Abigail found herself unable to sleep, worries for her brother filling her head. Deciding she could use a cup of tea, she went to the kitchen to prepare herself one. As she started boiling the water, she heard Alana’s light steps coming closer.

“Did you truly have a nightmare about the ship, Alana?” Asked Abigail with a teasing tone, and went to greet her friend, just to find Alana walking past her, her eyes opened but not present. Asleep.

Abigail was stuck in her place in shock. She had never known Alana to sleepwalk. She thought about calling louder for her, maybe grabbing her arm, but she wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to wake someone who was sleepwalking.

Deciding the best course of action was to keep an eye on her, she followed her friend, just to find she had already lost her. The door was open, so Abigail ran out, worried that Alana would hurt herself in the garden, but her friend had gone into the made from hedges that were taller than the both of them and so Abigail had no choice but to look in each path.

It took her longer than she expected, as dark as it was, she had gotten lost a few times, even if she had played there several times during her childhood, but when she finally got to the center of the maze, her friend was lying on the floor, innocently asleep.

Abigail shook Alana to wake her up.

“Abigail, what is going on?” And then, starting to get aware of her surroundings. “Where are we?”

“We are in the maze of your garden. You started sleepwalking and I followed you here,” explained Abigail, looking more confident than she felt. She decided to omit the fact that she lost Alana for a good ten minutes, as her friend didn’t look hurt anywhere.

“Sleepwalking? I’ve never done that before,” Alana said as she started to sit up.

“Maybe a consequence of the stress? All of the wedding planning, and the fact that Will hasn’t come back…” Abigail was sure she had once heard that stress could lead a woman to start sleepwalking. “Should we take you to a doctor?”

“No!” Alana raised her voice, then seemed to remember the situation and looked around, but it was still the middle of the night and they were alone, so no one had heard. “You have seen how sick my mother is, I couldn’t possibly give her something else to worry about.”

Abigail wasn’t sure that keeping the secret was the best course of action, but she decided to trust her friend's judgment.

“You are right, Lady Bloom’s health is too delicate. Besides, maybe it was just a one-time thing.” Abigail projected more confidence in her voice than she actually felt. “Let’s get you back inside before you get a cold.”

She walked her friend back to her room and bid her goodnight, then went back to her own room to sleep, suddenly overcome by fatigue.

The next night, Abigail woke up without apparent explanation. She could hear no noise, nor was anything in her room disturbed. Still, following her gut feeling, she put on her house shoes and a coat and ran to Alana’s room. The door was closed, but not locked, and when she opened it, she immediately saw the bed was empty.

Not believing for a moment that Alana had gone to the bathroom, Abigail run to the garden and the maze, following Alana's path of the previous night, and just as she expected, her friend was once again lying on the floor just at the center.

Abigail kneeled down next to Alana, ready to wake her up, but something in her neck caught her attention. Earlier that day they had gone to a fitting for Alana's wedding dress, and Abigail had first seen there the small dots in her friend's neck, but they had both assumed it was an accident with the safety pins.

Now, however, the dots looked just a bit bigger, and one of them had dried blood in it as if the wound was recent. Abigail put her hand on Alana's neck, with the plan of turning her friend's neck so that she could get a better look and the wounds, but the moment her fingers felt Alana's cold skin all thoughts of further investigation fled her brain.

"Alana, you are freezing," she said while shaking her friend awake. It took longer than last time, but eventually, Abigail managed it and helped her sit so she could give her the coat. She needed it far more. "Who knows how long you have been outside. Alana, we need to do something about this. If you still don't want to tell anyone, then I'm moving to your room to make sure you don't wander in the night."

"That may be a good idea, at least for a few nights, I don't think this problem will go on for long," accepted Alana, but Abigail feared her friend was talking from a place of denial. It was always easier to pretend the problem would go away on its own. It was Will's specialty.

So that's what they did. An extra bed was moved to Alana's room and Abigail went to sleep there, locking the door and tying the key to her wrist.

The first few nights it worked out just fine; as soon as Alana would stand up, Abigail would wake and carefully guide her friend back to her bed without even waking her up.

But then, as if the sleeping mind of her friend had understood she couldn't go anywhere, Abigail woke up one night to her friend standing next to the open window. She wasn't trying to climb up or anything, but Abigail still jumped from her bed, terrified that her friend would just fall.

As she guided Alana back to her bed, she noticed once again the small wounds on Alana's neck. They weren't bigger, but they hadn't healed either, and they still looked fresh. When morning came, Abigail mentioned it to Alana.

"I assume they are mosquito bites, I must be picking on them when I sleepwalk," was all the older woman had to say on the topic, but Abigail wasn't so sure anymore. Alana looked paler and was extremely tired in a way she hadn't been since the first time Abigail caught her sleepwalking.

Maybe it was part of the strange sickness that was plaguing her friend. And just as Abigail summoned the courage to go against Alana's wishes and tell someone, Lady Bloom decided to confide a secret in her.

"My heart is too weak," she said, breaking the silence of their embroidery session. "The doctor said he gives me a few months left, he doesn't think I'll live to see the next year."

"And there is nothing we can do to prolong it?" Asked Abigail knowing her friend would be heartbroken. In truth, even Abigail was sad about it. For all her shortcomings, Lady Bloom had not even once suggested Abigail was overstaying her welcome, even if her stay of one month had already passed the three months mark.

"The doctor said to avoid anything stressful, my heart can't take any strong emotions, but even then that won't give me long. My only joy is that Alana is to be married in three months, and I will see my little girl securing her future." She then turned to Abigail, and it was a wonder no one had realized how ill the woman was, as her expression was one of pure tiredness. "Please, do not tell my daughter, I shall tell her after the wedding, but I want nothing ruining her day. Your brother will come back, and she will have her family and friends at her wedding and it will be the happiest of days. Talks of death and illness can come after."

Abigail promised and realized Alana had been right by not telling her mother about her illness, and that may be the stress that pushed her mother's heart too far.

Not knowing what else to do, Abigail locked the window that night and put the key with the door's one on her wrist.

When she woke up that night, Alana was sitting on her bed, but not making any effort to stand. Instead, she was pointing at the window.

Abigail turned to the window and saw that, on the other side, a bat was flying in circles. Abigail felt chills running down her spine, even if she couldn't understand why, and she ran to the window to close the curtains, leaving the room in total darkness.

After tucking in Alana, as she had begun to used to in the last week and a half, Abigail sat on her bed and for the first time in her life, prayed for answers. About what to do about Alana, about Will, about herself, she was at a loss of what to do.

Two days later, Lord Sutcliff came back from a brief business trip, and Abigail was surprised when, instead of continuing their game of passively aggressively ignoring each other, he asked to have a chat with her.

Suspecting what he wanted to talk about, she accepted, and Alana took the chance to go rest happy that her friend and her fiancé looked to finally be getting along.

“What is wrong with Miss Bloom?” He asked as soon as they were alone in the garden, two cups of the on the table between them.

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly.

“How can you not know? You two spend all day together, I heard you are even sleeping in her bedroom,” he accused. Abigail held his gaze, not letting herself be intimidated by the man, and waited until he continued in a less aggressive voice. “The servants thought it was because you were getting nightmares, but it wasn’t that, was it?”

Abigail took a sip of her tea, considering her options. She was at the end of her wits in what to do with Alana, and Sutcliff was a doctor, he would know better what could be happening to her friend.

“It wasn’t. Alana has taken to sleepwalk at night, I had to go retrieve her to the garden twice before I decided to sleep in her room. She still gets up and tries to open the door, but she wakes me immediately and I can get her back to bed.” She took another sip of her tea. “She is always tired now, and sometimes she looks so pale as if there was not a drop of blood inside her.”

“And didn’t you think she might need a doctor?”

“Of course I did, but Lady Bloom confessed to me that she has been given no more than six months of life and that any stress could shorten that drastically. Alana doesn’t know that, but she knows her mother is in a delicate state, we were afraid that the worry could kill Lady Bloom.”

Doctor Sutcliff looked deep in thought, and Abigail was glad he was taking her worries into account.

“Has she shown any other symptoms? It doesn’t sound like anything I’ve heard.”

Abigail thought about the wounds on Alana’s neck. Her friend kept insisting they were mosquito bites, but Abigail wasn’t buying it anymore.

“On her neck, she has two small dots. Looks like animal bites, but she has had them ever since she started sleepwalking, and they don’t disappear. What’s more, sometimes they look so fresh they are even surrounded by dried blood.” Abigail could see the recognition in Sutcliff’s eyes and, misunderstanding it, she hurried to add, “No, they are not mosquitoes’ bites, I know what those look like.”

“I wouldn’t suggest otherwise,” clarified Sutcliff. “I was thinking I had a mentor, Professor Crawford, who specializes in obscure illness, although which criteria he uses to decide what is obscure is beyond me. I do, however, remember he had a patient with the same symptoms as Miss Bloom, down to the wounds in her neck.” Nodding to himself, Abigail could see the man immediately relaxing. “I will send a telegram to Professor Crawford, asking him to come urgently. I will also keep it quiet, so as to not alert Lady Bloom.”

Abigail nodded, happy that the man had an actual plan of what to do. They spent the rest of the time it took them to finish their tea in silence, not wanting to jeopardize the fragile truce they had by pushing each other's buttons.

"Abigail, you got a letter," informed Alana. It had been two days since her conversation with Doctor Sutcliff, and the man assured her Doctor Crawford would be here by week's end, but Alana's health keep decaying, and she had confessed to Abigail she was suffering from uncanny dreams even when she did not sleepwalk.

Even with all that fatigue, Abigail assumed her friend would look more excited if it was a letter from Will, but refusing to lose hope, she asked anyway,

"Is it from Will?"

"No, it's signed by Sister Agatha. But it comes from Budapest, so I assume it will be about Will."

Abigail took the letter from Alana's hands, refusing to live in ignorance a moment longer, and read it out loud.

"Dear Madam," the letter began, "I write by desire of Mister Will Graham, who is himself not strong enough to write," she could hear Alana's sigh of relief at Will's name," though, progressing well, thanks to God. He has been under our care for nearly six weeks, suffering from a violent brain fever. He asks you to let his boss know that he apologizes for the delay, but that all his work was completed. He will require some few weeks rest in our sanatorium in the hills, but will then return."

Abigail was crying so hard by that point, that Alana had to take the letter from her hands to keep reading, skipping over some less important details.

"P.S. My patient being asleep, I open this to let you know something more. He has told me about you, his little sister he has so dedicatedly taken care of, and I think you should know beforehand. He has had some fearful shock, so says our doctor, and in his delirium, his ravings have been dreadful, of wolves and poison and blood, of ghosts and demons, and I fear to say of what. Be careful of him always that there may be nothing to excite him of this kind for a long time to come. The traces of such illness as his do not lightly die away," she skipped some other parts, and Abigail made note of reading carefully the whole letter, once she stopped shaking.

Alana looked a bit worried, even in her relief, but Abigail couldn't sympathize. Nightmares of blood and ghosts and demons were usual for Will, and even if she had never known him to dream of wolves, she wasn't too worried. The poor sister would have been as scandalized if he had heard of Will's dreams before the brain fever.

A sudden thought that Will had mentioned an abundance of wolves in the town where he stayed the first night. She wondered if those two facts were related.

Alana gave Abigail back the letter and pulled her to her feet, as she had ended up kneeling on the floor after such an intense hurricane of feelings.

“Hurry, go to inform Will’s boss about his illness, I’ll pack your luggage and I’ll have Sutcliff map out your journey, you are leaving come morning,” instructed Alana, suddenly looking revitalized.

“What?” Asked Abigail, overwhelmed by her friend’s excitement. “Alana, I can’t just go alone to Budapest now. I’ve never even been to the continent. Besides, who will keep you from sleepwalking if I go?”

“Where is your sense of adventure? You’ll be fine, just take the pocket knife Will gifted you, and yes, I know about that,” she looked at her with vague disapproval, but it lost weight by what she was saying. “Doctor Crawford will be here soon, I’ll be fine. I still think this is mostly the stress, and knowing you are with your brother will be a sure relief.”

It was so unlike Alana, and yet Abigail understood perfectly. She must have been as worried for Abigail as Abigail was for her, and didn’t want her to wait God knows how many weeks longer to see him.

She jumped into Alana’s arms, hugging her friend tightly.

“You are the best,” she thanked her friend. Then run to the Bloom carriage, ready to follow her friend's instructions.

Lord Sutcliff, who Abigail was starting to warm up to, wrote her a detailed set of instructions for her journey, together with a list of phrases in German and Hungarian that could prove useful. He had traveled to Budapest before, so he could give her detailed descriptions of what she was looking for and how the places looked.

And like that, after a promising night where Alana didn’t stir once, Abigail began her way to her brother. Alana came with her to the railway station, where they parted ways. She went then to Hull and caught the boat to Hamburg.

The most difficult part was, once in Hamburg, to buy tickets for the train to Budapest, but between a worker with a vague understanding of English, and with the vocabulary Doctor Sutcliff prepared for her, they managed to get her on the right train.

Even just that travel was enough to exceed her expectations of how would it be to travel the world. It was a bit intimidating, even with her pocket knife always hidden but in her reach, but it was wonderful. She decided that she had humored enough of Will's sedentary life and that she will soon force him to travel with her.

Arriving at the sanatorium, she asked for Sister Agatha, the one who had written the letter, who immediately recognized her and took her to Will.

Abigail's first thought was that, if Alana had looked ill, then Will looked as close as dead as anyone could look without actually being dead. He was pale as a ghost, and even his eyes showed a strange fog. He also looked so thin, Abigail was sure an ill-timed hit could break him.

Sitting at the border of his bed, soup in hand that Sister Agatha had provided so she could help feed Will, Abigail murmured,

"You almost scared me with how bad you look."

Will laughed, and Abigail felt just a tad bad when he took his hand to his head, feeling dizzy at the sudden movement.

"Good to know not even all that time with Alana can teach you not to insult the convalescent."

Abigail grinned as she hadn't done in months, with pure happiness, as took the spoon to Will's mouth.

"Hush, you eat your soup, I have so much to catch you on about," she announced and began catching him up about Alana's marriage, Marissa's party and her time assisting Alana with her work as schoolmistress. She even added the story of the mysterious ship without a crew, leaving out the detail of a wolf, or big dog, coming out from it, as she remembered the Sister had mentioned as a newfound fear of Will.

She didn't tell him about Alana's illness, or Lady Bloom's. There would be time for that later.

Later, as it turned out, was three days later. Abigail was telling him about the letter she sent to Alana. They were sitting in the garden, and one of the Sisters deciding that Will could use some fresh air.

"You are worried about her, why?"

She then explained everything that had been happening to Alana, and Lady Bloom, and what she talked about with Lord Sutcliff.

“Then Professor Crawford must have arrived by now, I’m sure Alana is on her way to feel better,” he tried to reassure her, but midway through her tale, he had begun looking lost in thought. Abigail decided right then that it was time to ask.

“Will, what happened to you?”

He wasn’t surprised by the question, but he took his time answering it.

“I don’t know. Mostly, I don’t remember. I remember arriving at the Lecter State, but everything after that is… not clear. I think I was having nightmares, and now I have a hard time telling reality from dream.” He took a deep breath and then took something out of his pocket. “I believe a wrote in the diary through it all, but I’m too afraid to read it. The doctor said that forcing the brain to remember what it blocked out could make me sick again.”

“But don’t you want to know? Will, all of your letters except the first one you sent me when you arrived to Lithuania are so unlike you, and you say you are missing two months of your life, are you not curious?” Abigail couldn’t imagine having the strength not to ask questions if something like that happened to her.

“I don’t know that either. I can’t remember my nightmares when I wake up, but what the Sisters have told me I said during the worst of my fever, I have monsters inside my head.” He extended the journal to Abigail, who took it immediately. “You can read it, if you want, I know your curiosity is strong. If you think there’s something I should know, you can tell me, but otherwise, I think I will let my brain heal without the burden of whatever I went through.”

Abigail nodded. She still couldn’t understand, but seeing her brother so sick, so weak, she couldn’t blame him for wanting to prioritize his health. She must have looked unconvinced, for her brother added something more.

“I do want to read it. Every time I try to remember, every time I wake up from a dream that didn’t feel quite like a nightmare, I have the strong urge to read it, to go back somewhere, even if I don’t know where.” As he talked, his eyes were on the journal, and Abigail could see what he was talking about. He looked like a starving man looking at a bowl of food.

No, she couldn’t understand Will, or what was happening to him, but that wasn’t new. She didn’t need to understand Will, just to accept him and his decision.

“Fine, I’ll keep your secrets, even from yourself, until you are ready to have them back.” She hugged her brother, careful not to hurt him, but unable to stay away after missing him for so long.

Will hugged her back, and Abigail decided that everything would get better now.

Chapter End Notes

A year and almost 3 months. My new record on slow updates.

For anyone who may be worried about Abigail taking the rol of Mina on this fic, don't worry, next chapter Will is taking it back, I would never write even the slightest suggestion of Hannibal/Abigail. Never. Over my dead body. So yeah, Will IS Mina, his parallels to her wonderful and I will exploit all of them.

Talking about the next chapter, it will jump from Will's POV to Abigail's. According to my notes that I wrote when I first started planning this fic, like a year and a half ago, it will also be the longest chapter, so we'll see how long I take to write it this time.

See you next time! Remember that comments make the author very happy!

Extra note: Just in case it wasn't 100% clear, yes, Abigail had a crush on Marissa. In my heart Abigail is always a lesbian, but in all my other fics she's a bit too busy for it to become relevant to the plot. But like, just so you know, if I wrote it, she is a lesbian.

End Notes

First of all, endless thanks to SilverhairedStark for Beta-ing this work, she did a wonderful job of editing my messes, she's the real MVP here.

Also thanks to the over 500 people that liked my comment about finally dropping this fic on in that tiktok. You know which if you saw it.

When will the next chapter be ready? Hopefully soon. Although if you read my other works you know consistent updates aren't my specialty, but hoping is free. I would love to read in the comments what do you think of this first part!

(And btw: Yes, I'm mixing the Dracula book with the Bram Stoker's Dracula movie at my convenience to make Will take both of Jonathan and Mina's places depending on the moment.)

For more hannigram (+murder family because I love Abigail and refuse to write something where she isn't heavily present), feel free to check my profile where I have my Hunger Games AU,

Survival Horror

and my canon-compliant-ish one-shot set during the time skip,

A Room of Ghosts

.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!